

In the field, and from the photographs, the Kosi bird clearly had a small bill with a straight-shaped culmen and it can be seen to lack warm brown tones to the wing-coverts, showing instead two pale wing-bars – both good Pallas's Bunting features.

Assessing the points 'for' and 'against', it would seem that the majority of features support the identification as a Pallas's. Although the prominent supercilium and fine flank streaking were initially troubling the identification, subsequent field experience of many Pallas's Buntings in China in May 1995 showed that some females, particularly first-years, exhibited both these features.

This constitutes the first record for Nepal and the Indian subcontinent. The species breeds from north-east European Russia east to the Chukotskiy peninsula and south to the Tien Shan; it winters in China, Korea, south-east Russia and Japan (Byers *et al.* 1995). Vagrants have been recorded from Hong Kong (8-14 December 1991: Leader 1992), Maymyo, Myanmar (22 March 1902: Colston 1978), Fair Isle, U.K. (29 September - 11 October 1976: Broad and Oddie 1980, 17-18 September 1981: Riddiford and Broome 1983), Sussex,

U.K. (17 October 1990: Rogers *et al.* 1994) and Alaska, U.S.A. (11 June 1968, 28 May 1973: AOU 1983).

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Julian Hough, 51 Brook St., 6-C, Naugatuck, CT 06770, U.S.A.

A high-altitude breeding record of *Besra Accipiter virgatus*

JIM HACKETT

On 16 June 1996, at about 07h00, I was birding in the 'Primeval Forest' (a local name) about 35 km S of the resort of Jiuzhaigou (103°50'E 33°15'N) in the Min Shan (= Min Range), Sichuan Province, China. The forest (at about 3,300 m) is closed-canopy, relatively even-aged, Dragon Spruce *Picea asperata* to ca. 40 m, with a thin understorey of birch *Betula* and cherry *Prunus* over a substratum of mosses covering rocks and fallen timber. The forest is largely undisturbed by humans or domestic animals.

A long descending scream attracted my attention. On approaching the source, a small male *Accipiter* flew towards me and perched, for 45 min, in a variety of locations down to 15 m distance, during which time I could watch it continuously through 10x binoculars. During this period I scanned nearby trees and found a nest about 40 cm wide, untidily composed of twigs approximately 2 cm in diameter, positioned ca. 20 m up a spruce, pressed close to the trunk in a fork of the tree. A female *Accipiter* was on the nest. She did not move for 40 min, and I obtained views at 25 m distance.

The male was very small, with body length not over 25 cm, as judged by comparison with the limbs upon which he perched. In flight, the wings appeared short

and rounded. The back, visible flight feathers, and visible wing-coverts, were grey with an element of brown, most marked on the crown. There was a prominent white nape spot. The iris was deep red. The cere was yellow and the rest of the bill dark. The throat was off-white with a prominent thick mesial stripe. The ear-coverts were chestnut-orange, and this colour continued onto the breast, belly and flanks. On the flanks and belly, the colour broke into thick bars, separated by thin off-white bars. The legs were yellow and the claws black. The uppertail was grey with four darker transverse bars, each about 30% thicker than the intervening paler bars. The undertail was grey-brown. There was no white tail tip and no contrasting supercilium. The underwings were seen only briefly; they appeared white with darker barring and did not show any contrast between the tips of the flight feathers and the rest of the underwing.

The female was noticeably bigger, with body length perhaps 30% larger than the male, and was seen well only on the nest. The upperparts were grey-brown, lighter than the male. There was no nape spot. The ear-coverts were grey-brown. There was a very prominent, sharply defined white supercilium. The iris was bright yellow. The cere was yellow and the rest of the bill dark.

The throat was off-white with a prominent thick mesial stripe. Below this, the upper breast was streaked dark brown on a lighter brown background; there were teardrop-like streaks in the centre of the breast, and the belly and flanks were barred dark brown on a lighter brown background. The width of the dark brown bars was about the same as that of the intervening paler bars. The legs, claws, tail, and underwings were not well seen.

The main possible confusion species in Sichuan is Eurasian Sparrowhawk *Accipiter nisus* of the subspecies *melaschistos* (Sichuan Forestry Department 1994). *A. nisus melaschistos* is considerably larger than Besra (Ali and Ripley 1987). Also (like other races of Eurasian Sparrowhawk), *melaschistos* shows no mesial stripe, and the upper breast of the female is barred, not streaked (Ali and Ripley 1987).

There are suggestions that Besra may breed at fairly high altitudes in both Nepal and India. Inskipp and Inskipp (1985) show breeding near Kathmandu (Godavari Botanical Gardens, at 1,525 m), and Besra has also been noted in the breeding season at Namche Bazaar (28°N 86°45'E; 3,440 m). In north-west India, Besra is stated to be resident in Kashmir, Himachal Pradesh and Garhwal, up to 3,000 m (Ali and Ripley 1987). Breeding records from this area, however, come from 'between c. 1,000 and 2,000 m' (Ali and Ripley 1987). Likewise, Besra appears not to be a high-altitude breeder in eastern India, as Ali and Ripley (1987) observe that, while breeding has been noted 'eastward along the Himalayas to the Assam hills north and south of Brahmaputra river, and [in] Manipur (and East Pakistan?)' the altitudinal range given is 'between 1,000 and 2,000 m'.

Notably, Beaman (1994) defined the Palearctic boundary in W China to include 'the mountainous western margins of the Red Basin of Sichuan'. By

location, forest type (closed spruce), and altitude (3,300 m), the observation reported here occurred in the Palearctic. Besra (breeding or otherwise) does not appear to be recorded from the Chinese Palearctic. Cheng (1987) lists the bird for the Oriental region of the country only. In the mid-China Region as defined by Cheng (1987), specimens of Besra have been obtained at about 34°N 108°E and 30°N 103°E; these sites are both in the Oriental part of the country.

Besra has not previously been recorded breeding in spruce forest (essentially a temperate zone climax vegetation type). Ali and Ripley (1987) report that the bird 'affects broken forested country', and has been seen on 'tall dead trees on the verge of evergreen jungle'. In Sichuan, typical habitat is given as the edges of broad-leaved forest (Sichuan Forestry Department 1994). In Hong Kong, breeding habitat includes secondary shrubland and secondary evergreen broad-leaved woodland (pers. obs., M. Leven pers. comm.).

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Jim Hackett, Tower 116B, Senior Staff Quarters, HKUST, Clear Water Bay, Kowloon, Hong Kong, China

Observations on Hume's Groundpecker *Pseudopodoces humilis*

TIZIANO LONDEI

I observed Hume's Groundpecker *Pseudopodoces humilis* in Qinghai, Gansu and Sichuan provinces of China from 10-15 August 1996. The route travelled, which was part of a longer bus tour, began with a visit to Lake Qinghai (3,200 m), westwards along its south side to the headland improperly called 'Bird Island', and thence returning to Xining. From this town, heading southwards along a provincial road, the route crossed the Huang He near Jainca, and ascended a tributary

valley up to Tongren (2,500 m), Qinghai. Xiahe (also called Labrang, 2,900 m) in Gansu, was reached via a secondary road which ascended to 3,600 m. The 'highway' connecting Lanzhou and Chengdu was followed (reaching 3,600 m) from the vicinity of Xiahe to Zoigê, Sichuan (3,300 m). Afterwards, via a secondary road the route headed first eastwards up to the nearest mountain tract (up to 3,800 m), then southwards to reach Songpan (2,800 m) in the Min river valley.